

SELF-ESTEEM AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

8. CONSEQUENCES OF AN IMPOVERISHED SELF-ESTEEM

8.1. False Self-Esteem

False self-esteem comes from people who build up their little egos based on their surface self. They only see themselves as their physical appearance, their personal story, bank account and even their past conquests. They never allow themselves to get close to anyone and make up an excuse when things heat up in a relationship. Inflated self-worth gives them a false impression of both their worth and abilities. It is thought that it can help to present a false picture of use to the world and the people around them. Whether this is by choice or not the repercussions can be the same, though the resolution may well be different.

When it is a healthy increase then all can be well. We feel good about ourselves and happy with our efforts in life. We have a healthy self-image. Our self-esteem is good and our confidence and motivation in life runs parallel with these good feelings. We try harder and achieve more and life is good. When the increase is an inflation, when we have inflated self-worth, with poor support warning bells should ring. This can be a transitory increase in self-worth. It appears real but does not have the real support of good honest effort and well-earned accomplishment. This false and inflated self-worth leads people to try things that they would otherwise not try, think things they would otherwise not consider, say things they would do well to reconsider or retract. All may appear well but a tricky and untrustworthy period may be happening in their life. They would do well to take stock and re-evaluate what is happening in our life. Their self-worth can be falsely increased as it were. Something happens that leads them to think they have done well or that they are doing well. Or the situation or perception is talked up, either by them or others. So inflated self-worth can be exaggerated beyond what is normal and hyped up and out of synch with the rest of their lives. False self-worth is counterproductive. While people may feel it helps them along, actually it hinders them and sets them up for a fall. Beware its silky and slippery effects on both people and the lives lead. Common sense can tell us the

results of false self-worth. Inflated self-worth can...

- make us feel we can achieve anything
- make us feel we can do anything
- make us feel that we are superior
- make us feel that we can ignore our common sense and intuition
- make us arrogant and unwilling to listen to reason

Years ago researchers discussed the effects that false self-esteem is likely to have on children raised to think every little thing they did, to include failure, was awesome. A couple of decades ago, some parents of the “me” generation adopted the false self-esteem premise Nathaniel Branden published in ‘The Psychology of Self-Esteem’ (1969) which purported that the most important factor in raising a child was instilling a healthy sense of self-worth. For decades afterward, children’s television shows reminded their young viewers that they were the most important people in the world. Teachers heaped praise upon even the most lackluster students, and little league coaches dispensed trophies to anyone who showed up to play. Criticism and competition became suspect. That spawned the all about me generation. And that generation is now parents. As you might imagine, the way they were raised has had a less than desirable effect on how some of them approach the job of being a mom or dad.

Narcissistic people crave attention and admiration in order to ward off feelings of inferiority and to bolster a fragile sense of self. In other words, they have no authentic self-esteem and look to others to provide a substitute for it. The problem with external sources of self-esteem, as with all drugs, is that they wear off and you have to secure more of it to feed your habit. As a result, those individuals without genuine self-esteem have an insatiable need for their egos to be bolstered by the people around them. In this sense, it would make sense to talk about them as addicts, even if addicted to self-esteem is ridiculous. Besides, receiving a compliment has nothing to do with authentic self-esteem. You can’t obtain real self-esteem from the outside. Yes, it’s important that our parents praise and encourage us as we grow up. We internalize that praise, along with their values and standards and those of our teachers, peers and social environment. Then, once they’ve become a part of us, we must live up to those standards if we’re to feel good about ourselves. This is not referring to perfectionistic and overly harsh standards, impossible to meet. This means our own ideas and expectations, evolved from the disparate influences of family, peer group and culture, about what it means to be and behave like a person we would respect. Rather, it’s a way of making clear that self-esteem is something

that is earned. Maybe self-respect would be a better way of talking about the issue. All respect has to be earned, including self-respect. In this connection, I think that self-confidence is another useful concept, if you consider confidence in its secondary meaning, something confided or entrusted. Authentic self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem grow out of knowing yourself very well, including your capacity for destructiveness (confiding in yourself, as it were) and behaving in ways that you respect by meeting your own standards and keeping destructiveness in check.

8.2. Low Self-Esteem in Children & Adolescents

In regards to family counseling, self-esteem can have significant impact on relationships. It generally seems that family members are more prone to act badly toward each other when they are feeling bad about themselves. The worse they feel about themselves, the worse they often treat others, the worse they get treated in return, the worse they end up feeling about themselves, the worse they treat others, and round and round the cycle of unhappiness goes. In low self-esteem families, relationships can become mutually destructive. In high self-esteem families, however, the reverse seems more likely to occur. The better family members feel about themselves, the better they treat each other, the better they get treated in return, the better off everyone tends to become. In high self-esteem families, relationships can become mutually affirming. Members seem more inclined to bring out the best in each other, not the worst. So positive self-esteem is not some kind of popular fad or new-age frill. Upon its existence, the happy and healthy functioning of individuals and families partly depend, particularly during children's teenage years.

Researchers note two major self-esteem drops during the normal course of adolescence. The first drop occurs at the outset in early adolescence (ages 9-13) when the young person's separation from childhood creates a loss of contentment with being defined and treated any longer as just a child. In this process, many components of self-definition now considered "childish". Beloved interests, activities, and relationships that supported self-esteem may be sacrificed for the sake of future growth and acting older. A lot of kid stuff of significant psychological value can be thrown away. Old toys and hobbies can be abandoned, and even cherished grandparents can be put at a distance. The second drop in self-esteem occurs during the end of adolescence, trial independence (ages 18-23), when the young person is confronted with the daunting reality of independence and

feels overwhelmed and diminished by the future shock. Feeling not up to this challenge and sometimes acting this way, it is easy to feel disappointed in themselves, to get down on themselves, and even to punish themselves, esteem falling in the process. So what is self-esteem? It is not real in the sense that it can be visually examined, physically touched, or directly observed. Similar to notions like 'intelligence' or 'conscience', self-esteem is an abstract psychological concept made up to describe part of a person's human nature. Its existence and utility is inferred through actions and expressions considered evidence of its presence. Just as solving a problem may be considered evidence of intelligence, or acting in accord with one's ethical beliefs may be considered evidence of conscience, insisting on being dealt with fairly or respectfully may be considered evidence of self-esteem, the young person acting as though they are worth treating well.

More specifically, self-esteem is two words compounded into one. Separate them, and the meaning of the larger term comes clear. Self is a descriptive concept: By what specific characteristics do I identify who I am? The term esteem is an evaluative concept: How do I judge the value of who I am? Self-esteem has to do with how a person identifies and evaluates his or her definition of self. Start with self-esteem as identification. When the adolescent commits his or her identity to just one part of life from to having friends, to competitive sports, to high academic achievement - then when friends are lost, when injury ends athletics, when academic performance drops, esteem comes crashing down. Some utter quotes like, "I'm nothing without my friends!" "I'm worthless without my sport!" "I'm a failure if I don't make an A!" To maintain relative constancy of well-being through the normal ups and downs of adolescence, it really helps to have multiple pillars of self-esteem. Consider self-esteem as evaluation. Adolescents are routinely hard on themselves, from insisting on excellence, from criticizing failings to punishing mistakes. Then when expectations are unmet, when imperfections become apparent, when human errors occur, esteem comes crashing down. At this point, the following quotes can be uttered; "I'm so stupid!" "What's wrong with me!" "I can't do anything right!" To maintain constancy of well-being during the trials of adolescence, it really helps when life goes badly to treat oneself with tolerance and understanding. Particularly in the response to a bad experience where impulsive or unwise decision making led to error, disappointment, or trouble, an adolescent can get into some pretty harsh self-evaluation, descending common steps that systematically lower self-esteem. They are: make a bad choice, suffer hurt feelings, self-criticize or blame, and punish self for acting badly. So what can we say to our adolescents about self-esteem? Consider the following advice; "The more narrowly you define yourself and the more negatively you evaluate yourself, the more at risk of lowered self-esteem you are likely to be. In that unhappy state,

you may also be more at risk of treating yourself and others badly. Therefore, do yourself a favor. To maintain positive self-esteem, define yourself broadly and evaluate yourself kindly and most of the time you will appreciate the value, and enjoy the company, of who and how you are." Is there such a thing as having too much self-esteem? Yes, people who prize themselves too highly often believe they are superior, are always right, are owed special consideration and treatment, needs allow no disagreement, know it all (or at least all worth knowing), deserve to be given their way, and should be allowed to rule over the lives of others. Many tyrants, petty and great, from the entitled child to the cruel despot, have had extremely high self-esteem, to other people's cost. Within the matrix of concepts that explain psychological functioning, we believe self-esteem has a useful place. Important as it is, however, strong self-esteem is not everything. For example, it is independent of morality. Strong self-esteem does not prevent wrongdoing. People who feel extremely positive about who and how they are can still become bullies, criminals, and even destructive zealots. Evil can claim strong self-esteem as easily as can good.

Regarding schooling, promoting high self-concept is important because it relates to academic and life success, but before investing significant time, money, and effort on packaged programs, principals should understand why such endeavors have failed and what schools can do to effectively foster students' self-esteem and self-concept. Although the terms self-concept and self-esteem are often used interchangeably, they represent different but related constructs. Self-concept refers to a student's perceptions of competence or adequacy in academic and nonacademic (e.g., social, behavioral, and athletic) domains and is best represented by a profile of self-perceptions across domains. Self-esteem is a student's overall evaluation of him or herself, including feelings of general happiness and satisfaction. Schools are most likely to support students' positive self-esteem by implementing strategies that promote their self-concept. Students frequently display a decline in self-concept during elementary school and the transition to middle level. This decrease represents an adaptive reaction to the overly positive self-perceptions that are characteristic of childhood. Young children tend to overestimate their competence, because they lack the cognitive maturity to critically evaluate their abilities and to integrate information from multiple sources. As students develop, they better understand how others view their skills and better distinguish between their efforts and abilities. As a result, their self-perceptions become increasingly accurate.

As students transition from middle level to high school, their self-concept gradually grows. Increasing freedom allows adolescents greater opportunities to participate in activities in which they are competent, and increased perspective-taking abilities enable them to garner more support from others by behaving in more socially acceptable ways. Self-concept is frequently positively correlated with academic performance, but it appears to be a consequence rather than a cause of high achievement. This suggests that increasing students' academic skills is a more effective means to boost their self-concept than vice versa. Another popular assumption is that aggressive students have low self-concept and use aggression as a means of raising it. Substantial research contradicts this assumption, showing that many aggressive students express adequate, if not inflated, self-concept. Low self-concept is often considered a defining characteristic of depression, but evidence for this is weak. Similarly, although some evidence suggests that low self-concept may be a weak risk factor for smoking in girls, the relationship between self-concept and the use of alcohol and illegal drugs has little support. Principals are advised not to focus on self-concept in hopes of preventing or remediating children's academic or interpersonal problems, but rather to focus on building students' competencies and self-perceptions, which in turn will promote their self-concept and ultimately, self-esteem.

Teachers can prevent or reduce feelings of low self-concept by reducing social comparison cues in the classroom. Helping students change the point of reference they use when judging their abilities may help them change their self-perceptions. Encouraging students to focus on how much they have improved over time instead of focusing on how their peers are doing is a simple way of avoiding negative self-perceptions and low motivation. Teachers also can promote self-concept by fostering supportive relationships among students. Students' perceptions of their classroom as a caring community are positively related to their academic, social, and global self-concepts. The relationship between sense of community and academic self-concept is particularly pronounced in high-poverty schools. Self-esteem is also independent of outcome. It does not assure accomplishment. People who feel confident about performing well are still capable of making misunderstandings, miscalculations, and mistakes. Strong self-esteem can lead a person into failure as well as to success. Consider this prescription for preserving strong self-esteem; "There's a lot of talk about self-esteem these days. It seems pretty basic to me. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can feel proud of. Feelings follow actions."